

Paper Menu

Kat Y. Tang



For dinner, Mom served her signature chicken curry with glistening red sauce and fluffy white rice.



That was the moment I finally felt homesick.

Mom did all the talking.

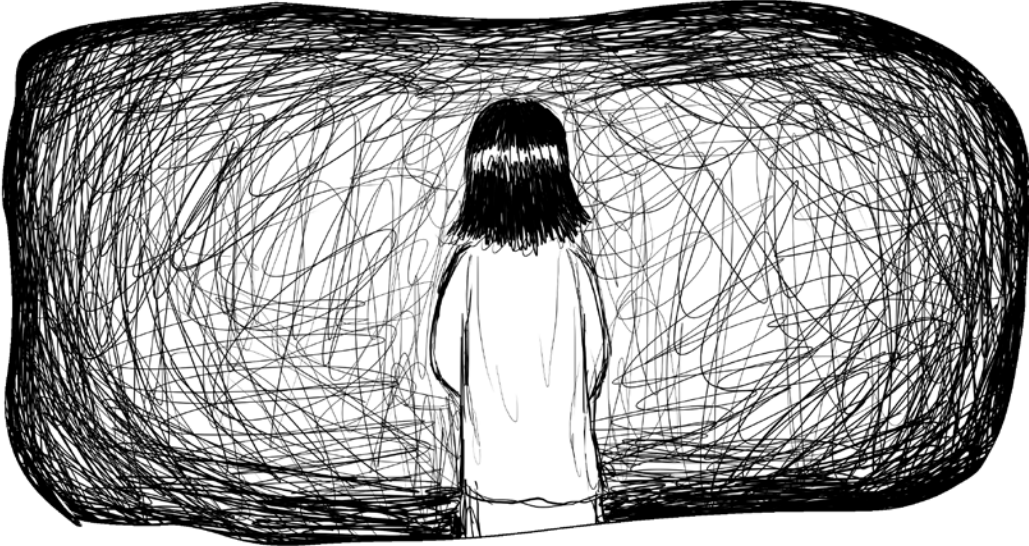


You should have heard the neighbors when they told us we had to move out! Not everyone was okay with it like me and Daddy. You remember your friend Bian, her mother was not happy about it. It's tough, you know, we've been here so long. But we moved so fast from Cambodia to here and we're still closer to the jewelry store because that thief got away before Daddy could catch him. We're okay though.

Where are you going to move?

Nearby.





Luckily, I was only home over the weekend.
A necessary layover before flying to Japan
for my summer internship.

Oh, but you can't throw THIS away, Vanny.
Your aunt saved for so long so she could send son
from India for your birthday. You know it's not che
all the way from India. You know it's not che
use it for your internship. You know it's not che
at Harvard vs. MIT. You know it's not che
You don't know what you're doing. You don't know
But when you have children they even if
cartoons.



Why not just buy a
new one?

No money.



Everything bothered me

My mother's incessant chatter.

My dad's miserliness.

The neighbor's poor music taste
thrumming through thin walls.

The dryness that caused dead
skin to flake off onto my palms
when rubbed, like epidermis dust

The way everyone piled their
junk in the courtyard.

How every single item in my
room contained unpleasant
memories that waylaid me
without warning.

The way Khmer sounded on
my tongue: rough and
rudimentary.

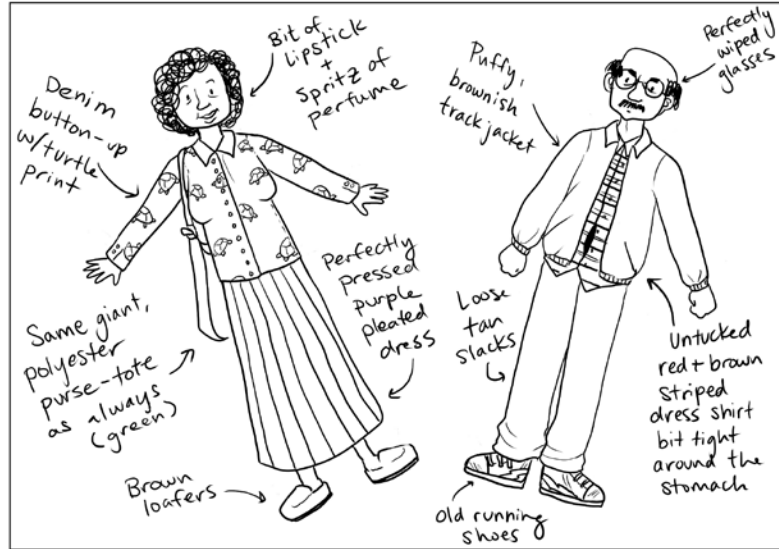
I missed the east coast.
I missed the ivy creeping
over storied red brick, the
chandeliered dining halls,
the housing that sounded
like monied lives: Lowell,
Winthrop, Quincy, Leverett.



Nostalgic indulgence was for those who could afford it, and we couldn't afford much at all.



My parents put on their "best" clothes that had not changed for the last two decades.



The hotel lobby was dingy and its bar devoid of patrons.

Daddy says that the steak here is really great so we must get that! And they have an amazing menu made of wood! Isn't that just incredible? Last time we ate out at a restaurant was when you got into Harvard. But then we couldn't afford the phone bill so we sat down the street so we sa-



The entrance to the restaurant garish

Do you have a reservation?

STEAK
HAUS

The interior was spectacularly overrun with a mishmash of decor

As though a child with ADHD were tasked to imagine what a fancy steakhouse might look like.

To me, it was all terribly depressing. But my parents seemed happy.

Wow, look!
The menu is so long!
And it's made out of wood!

Menu

The menu WAS impressive and expensive.

Menu

[Mains]

16 oz Ribeye

62

Dry aged to perfection among bags of salt flown in from the Himalayas and with luxurious pommes purée

Order whatever you want.

1/2 lb Filet Mignon

44

Breached in a duo of peppercorns sauce served with harvested haricots vert with essence of porcini mushroom

10 oz NY strip

38

Tender New York strip au poivre with courvoisier cream served on a bed of mascerated black cherries

Wow, Dad.

Are you sure?

Roasted Chicken Breast

Succulent breast meat sautéed in sherry jus served with cool, crisp greens with housemade vinaigrette

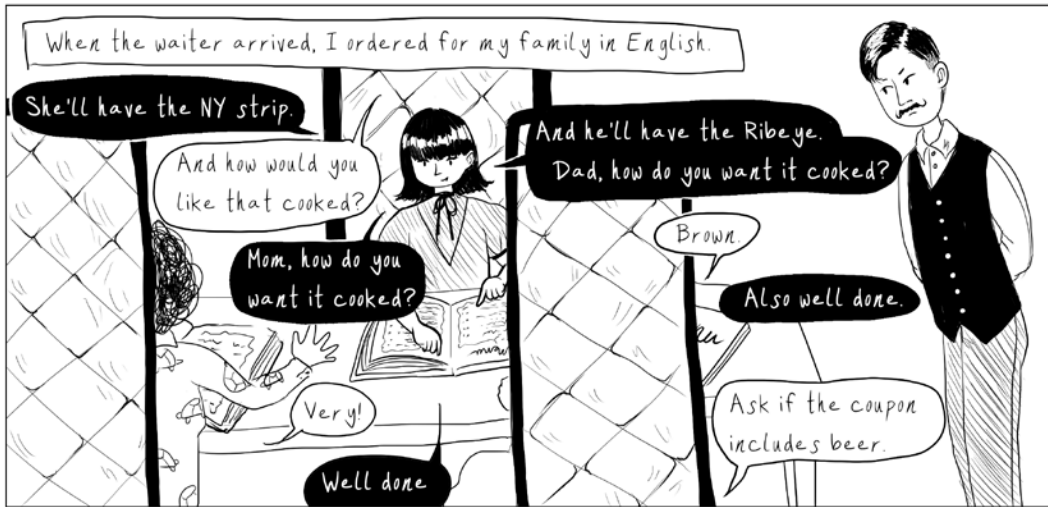
1/2 lb White Fish

34

Toothsome fish of the day flash fried and served with effervescent foam on a bed of endives

Don't worry, we have a coupon!

It's a very good deal actually. My daddy got it when he



I don't remember what I ordered. All I remember is that it wasn't very good.

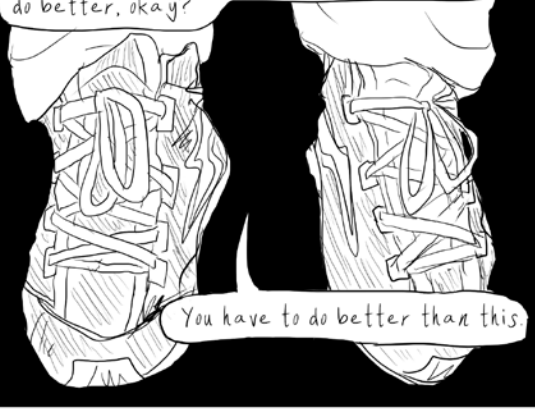


It was a tense ride home. All I could think about was leaving for Japan the next day.

Back at the apartment complex, much to my surprise, my dad spoke first.



When I fled the regime and came to America, this was all I could do. But you, you have to do better, okay?



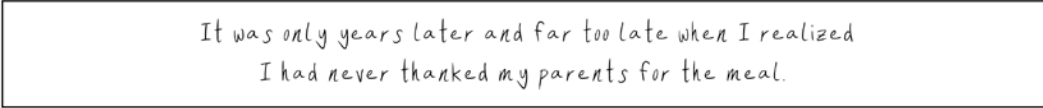
Dad didn't say what "this" was. He didn't have to.



His shame embarrassed me, and I didn't know how to respond.



It was only years later and far too late when I realized I had never thanked my parents for the meal.



INTERVIEW

WITH KAT Y. TANG

When did you create “Paper Menu”?

That’s actually an interesting question because “Paper Menu” is a story I’ve come back to time and time again. I have a document that’s titled “Paper Menu (rewrites)” with one version of the story written in 2018 and then a completely different version in 2019. This version, from 2020, is the first time I’ve told the story in comic form instead of as a short story and somehow that made all the difference!

Did you have a difficult time deciding on whether to add a title to your work?

I knew what the title of the work would be, but I didn’t know whether or not to have a full title page. Ultimately, I was struck by the simple power of a white on black title page.

Perhaps the harder decision, though, was whether or not to have my name on the title page. While writing and drawing the comic (which is part of a larger novel), I envisioned that this was a comic created by Vanny a few years after the events of this story when she’s had a bit of time to reflect. Therefore, I actually considered penning in Vanny as the author. But as a stand-alone piece, I think that would have been too confusing, so I used my name instead. But in the novel, I will probably put Vanny’s name or leave the name off entirely so the reader can draw their own conclusions about the authorship of the comic.

“Paper Menu” is a powerful lens into family dynamics. Which parts of this story were the easiest to translate into a comic? Which were the hardest?

Since “Paper Menu” is part of a longer novel, I’ve had a lot of time thinking about things, like how the apartment complex looked and what sorts of interests

Vanny would have had growing up. The other girls in the drawing Vanny picks up—Emily, Grace, Bian, and Jinny—are characters whose POVs you get in the rest of the novel. Actually, that panel was such a mindfuck (am I allowed to say fuck?) because it was me drawing Vanny drawing herself looking at a drawing that I drew of her drawing of her childhood drawing. Say that ten times fast.

The harder part to translate into comic form was the way characters related to each other. In prose, you can use lengthy narrative to tell the reader what the dynamic is between characters. But with a comic, where visuals and not words are prioritized, that has to be done through other means. I think character placement on the page helped (how far apart did they sit or stand from each other in the panel?) as well as establishing routine interactions in the earlier pages.

Artists and writers are always evolving and improving their craft. What are some choices you made in “Paper Menu” that differ from previous work?

This is actually the first full graphic narrative I’ve ever drawn, so it was really fun for me, as someone who’s currently at an MFA program for more traditional prose writing, to play around with a different form.

Just like characters can be crafted in written language through a well-chosen word, comics are amazing because you can change a character with a single line. I found it so fun to play around with the nuances of expression and also the juxtaposition of words and drawings: are they telling the same story? Different stories? Is the character lying to herself, to the audience? Why? What does Vanny the “author” want and how is that conveyed through Vanny the “character”?

What do either of them get? As a professor of mine often said, “the difference between what the character wants and what the character gets is story.”

There are several moments in the comic where speech bubbles are obscured by a character in the foreground, adding layers of complexity and character building to this intimate story. Is this a technique you have used before? What do you think can be gained in these moments where parts of the dialogue might be lost?

I think because drawing comics is new to me, it's easier to break with convention because I don't really know what convention is! Generally, I felt more free to do what fit the needs of the characters. That's why Vanny's dialogue bubbles are in black and Vanny's mother's dialogue runs on and on and is often obscured by other characters (often Vanny herself). Kids often tune out what their parents say, and since the story is told from Vanny's perspective, we get what she hears and not the whole story, even if we as readers might want to know the full extent of what her mother is saying! I tried to leave enough in so that an interested reader might be able to piece it together if they wanted to.

What font do you use for the dialogue? Outside of the consistency, it almost appears handwritten. What do handwritten fonts add to a text—especially one narrated as yours is?

My handwriting is exceptionally awful, so I had to create a font based off of my handwriting so that it would be consistent and legible enough to read!

I also wanted the whole comic to have an intimate feel to it, almost claustrophobically so, hence why I chose not to use standard fonts. The only place where you see a standard font is with the “fancy” menu and I think it adds to the feeling of this meal being something beyond their means.

What was the hardest part of crafting the piece?

My back! Hunching over a Cintiq (drawing tablet) for hours every day takes its toll on you physically. But in all seriousness, I think it was evoking emotions through characters that felt human, which is really

what I endeavor for in all my work.

Planning out the frames ahead of time and pacing the story was definitely the hardest part for me because I'm used to doing that with words and not with frames and images. It's also much more time consuming to redraw frames than to rewrite prose!

Transitioning from creating artwork to fully-fledged comics can often feel daunting for artists. Do you have any tips for aspiring comic writers? What were things you wish you would have known when you were starting out?

I'm not sure I'm the most qualified to be giving tips, but, this is my first full-fledged comic and it's now published with *Driftwood Press*! So I guess my tip would just be to go for it! You never know what's been brewing for years that's just waiting to turn itself into a comic or short story or interpretive dance or whatever amazing form. Just be open to the possibilities.

Also, remember that completing a project is an achievement worth celebrating. That's something I tell myself so that I actually complete any one of the ten projects I'm always starting at the same time.

What other mediums have influenced your work? How?

I'm a staunch believer that everything in life, especially if it's creative, can fuel your work. I've dabbled in a myriad of creative outlets: break dancing, pottery, graphic design, piano, graffiti stenciling, DND, painting, weaving, and so on. There are certainly principles that apply across artistic pursuits, and especially ideas around space, contrast, and surprise are ones that I got from other artistic fields that I thought about a lot as I was working on this comic.

What are your own artistic goals for the future? Simply, what do you want to do next?

Now that I've written one comic, I'm excited to try out more (maybe with color next time?). I'm also, as I mentioned above, working on a novel that's mostly traditional prose, with the exception of “Paper Menu.” Hoping to get a first draft of that done some time this year and then publish my first book!